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DR Congo Update

Search for Common Ground

Country Situation

The electoral process in the DRC is in full swing, with the successful constitutional referendum held on the 18th and 19th of December 2005 and the registering of candidates for the presidential and parliamentary elections starting in March. However, continued delays make meeting the 30 June deadline – even for the first round of elections – a major challenge. Tensions are mounting related to the possible negotiated prolongation of the transition, and acceptance of a new electoral calendar proposed by the Independent Electoral Commission. Despite the acceptance of the referendum results by the opposition UDPS, this party continues to resist full involvement in the process; the RCD-Goma also threatened to pull out of the process after the Minembwe territory of South Kivu was not recognised in the electoral law, promulgated in March.

Nevertheless, the security situation and humanitarian situation remains extremely negative, particularly in the Kivus, Ituri and northern Katanga. Violence and displacement is due to the refusal of several former Mai-Mai battalions to adhere to the ‘*brassage*’ (army unification). Attacks by the Rwandan FDLR rebels in the Kivus rose sharply just after a joint FARDC-Monuc military operation attempted to ‘clear’ them from certain zones of South Kivu province. On a more positive note, the facilitated repatriation of Congolese refugees from the Tanzanian refugee camps to South Kivu continues, with up to 1,000 returnees arriving every week in Baraka and Uvira. More than 30,000 Congolese have returned to South Kivu in the last six months, both spontaneously and through the UNHCR-assisted programme.

DDR: Tackling Conflicts through Information and Training

In every post-conflict context, the process of disarming, demobilising and reintegrating ex-combatants is potentially rife with conflict. DRC is no different. Over the last year approximately 50,000 combatants have opted for demobilisation. Their successful reintegration into civilian life depends on the support of the National Commission for DDR (Conader), as well as the demobilised soldiers’ own initiative and community collaboration.

A multi-pronged information and training project is underway by SFCG in DRC in collaboration with Conader, aimed at reinforcing Conader’s capacity, informing demobilised soldiers, and reaching out to the general population with information and positive examples of social reintegration. This project includes a weekly radio drama series, in lingala and swahili, which tells the stories of an adult ex-soldier and child ex-combatant as they undergo the demobilisation and reintegration process. Entitled “Tomorrow is a New Day”, the radio drama highlights the risks of manipulation and stereotypes while passing on clear information about the DDR process and the role of each and every Congolese in the eventual success of this process. Characters include Olivier, a career soldier who decides to return to civilian life, gets rejected by his brother-in-law, but finds a long-lost love in Mado who has returned from the refugee camps. Espoir is the child soldier wavering between staying on at Texas’ mining compound or choosing demobilisation. Grace is timid, traumatised and stigmatised after having been mistreated by the armed groups – but the discovery of her beautiful singing voice in church will open the door to compassion and understanding by neighbours and friends.

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Search for Common Ground in the DRC is a programme of Search for Common Ground, an international NGO working in the field of conflict transformation. For additional information on SFCG in DRC, go to the SFCG website, www.sfcg.org and the Centre Lokole website, www.centrelokole.org.

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This radio drama is complemented by SFCG training of Conader agents in all 11 provinces who work face-to-face with the ex-combattants in the Orientation Centres. Using a series of A3 size images, these agents are trained in communicating DDR messages as well as transforming the conflicts arising in the DDR process. Comic books and posters will soon reinforce these messages. Lastly, SFCG's participatory theatre coordinator is training theatre troupes in all provinces to understand the DDR process and identify inherent conflicts. In collaboration

Repatriation in Peace

The last six months has seen the beginning of a massive return of Congolese refugees from the Tanzanian refugee camps to South Kivu. Facilitated UNHCR-assisted return began officially in October; by March nearly 15,000 had been repatriated with this assistance while another 18,000 had returned spontaneously. The arrival of 30,000 returnees to a zone ravaged by war, lacking infrastructure including basic health facilities and drinking water, poses many challenges. In particular, land and property conflicts await nearly every returnee.

Recognising the conflict potential of this process, SFCG in collaboration with the UNHCR and with support from all its donors has undertaken a multi-pronged conflict transformation initiative using communication and collaboration approaches.

A weekly Swahili language radio program, entitled *Tukutane Tena* ("we all meet again") aims to clarify information regarding the repatriation process, assistance given, and the rights of returnees and residents. It also highlights positive approaches to conflicts arising in this processes. As well, SFCG trained 20 journalists working with local radios in the main return zone, to assist them in responsibly handling conflicts related to repatriation. SFCG's participatory theatre troupe performed more than 25 times in recent months, reaching an estimated 9,000 returnees and residents, and giving them a forum to propose non-violent solutions to conflicts.

Reactions to this theatre point to its impact in transforming conflict:

- ◆ A member of the human rights organisation Arche d'Alliance, a local partner to the HCR protection section, said: *"You (SFCG) have left your trace everywhere. If someone comes to us to report their case, they always refer to your theatre performance, saying "Centre Lokole said that we should try and resolve our problem peacefully. I don't want to use violence to take it to the courts, so can you help us?"*
- ◆ This was also testified by a repatriated Congolese (Sele Apendi) who testified: *"I'm a witness to this conflict resolution. I watched the Jirani ni Ndugu theatre of Centre Lokole, in which the people said we shouldn't use violence to resolve our problems. I then went to see Arche d'Alliance, who helped me and the person that had bought my house. Today, as I speak to you, I have recuperated my house and I say thanks to Centre Lokole and Arche d'Alliance."*

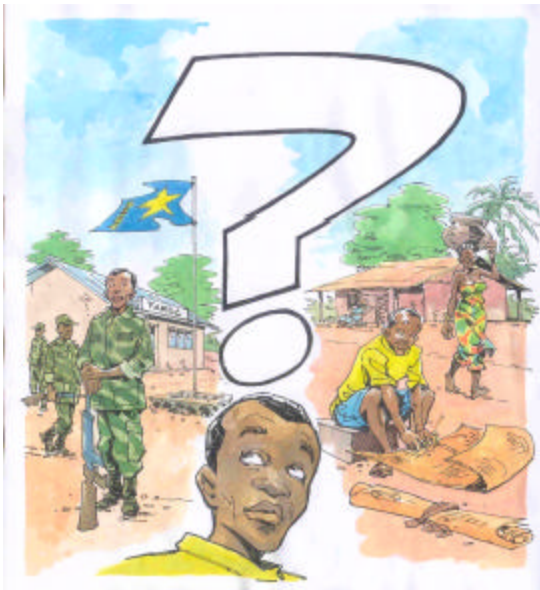


Image box used for the DDR trainers

Lastly, five committees comprising residents and returnees have been es-

tablished and trained in conflict transformation, and are preparing to launch small joint projects which address community needs and promote coexistence. These projects will include a goat credit scheme, a community canteen, corn grinding machines and community water taps.

To view an extract of SFCG's participatory theatre in action, go to the link:

http://www.sfcg.org/programmes/drcongo/drcongo_participatory.html

SFCG Supporting Elections Education

SFCG consistently produces programmes about the electoral process, highlighting issues sensitive to provoking conflict. Our three weekly programmes out of our Kinshasa production studio have addressed the electoral law, the issue of voter circumscriptions, the role of media in covering the electoral campaign, and the concern about the electoral calendar and the 30 June deadline.

In collaboration with the Independent Electoral Commission and organisations such as Institut Panos Paris, SFCG sends out critical documents, legal texts and civic education information to all of its 80 partner radio stations around the country. This documentation ensures that journalists in our partner radio stations are up-to-date with the latest information about the electoral process, thus diminishing the risks of misinformation, propagation of rumours and manipulation of journalists by political leaders.

In coming months SFCG will put more emphasis on this, as risks of conflict and tensions rise with the electoral campaigns. A series of short 60-second spots is planned to promote constructive and responsible behaviour by politicians and ordinary people in coming months.

SFCG Programmes “Inventive, Creative and Reduce tensions” - Evaluation

An evaluation of SFCG’s work over the last 18 months, conducted by Tripleline Consulting and funded by DFID, was completed during the last quarter. The evaluation was based on interviews with donors, local government representatives, partner radio stations, community groups, other NGOs and listeners to SFCG programmes. Here are some of the extracts:

- ◆ *‘CL is the only organisation in DRC that is advocating conflict transformation to a mass-audience. It combines practical peace-building with the power of the mass-media (i.e. radio), to inform and encourage Congolese participation in the ongoing peace process, as well as influencing knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of the audience in ways that can facilitate peace. [...] There is some evidence that CL’s outputs have helped to reduce general levels of tension, as well as contributing to specific instances where violence has been prevented...’.*
- ◆ *‘Programmes have contributed to transition processes by enabling people to become better informed about the transition and better able to assess and act on information, and by providing outlets for popular opinions and commentary’.*
- ◆ *‘No one else is using live, participatory theatre to promote peace in the same way as CL.’*
- ◆ *The evaluators consider that SFCG’s ‘approach is an example to other organisations on how to use a multi-media approach with inventiveness and creativity, and, as such, is a contribution to improve media standards throughout DRC’.*
- ◆ *However, it was also noted that ‘the community-level work has not received the attention that it deserves [...] CL should look for ways to enhance synergies between community reconciliation work and media work’*

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SFCG in DRC is grateful for the support of these donors:

